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Our File No.: 116582

**UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
EASTERN DISTRICT OF NEW YORK**

Heather Dymond, individually and on behalf of all others
similarly situated,

Plaintiff,

vs.

Commonwealth Financial System, Inc.,

Defendant.

Docket No:

CLASS ACTION COMPLAINT

JURY TRIAL DEMANDED

Heather Dymond, individually and on behalf of all others similarly situated (hereinafter referred to as “*Plaintiff*”), by and through the undersigned counsel, complains, states and alleges against Commonwealth Financial System, Inc. (hereinafter referred to as “*Defendant*”), as follows:

INTRODUCTION

1. This action seeks to recover for violations of the Fair Debt Collection Practices Act, 15 U.S.C. § 1692, *et seq.* (the “FDCPA”).

JURISDICTION AND VENUE

2. This Court has federal subject matter jurisdiction pursuant to 28 U.S.C. § 1331 and 15 U.S.C. § 1692k(d).



3. Venue is proper under 28 U.S.C. § 1391(b) because a substantial part of the events or omissions giving rise to the claim occurred in this Judicial District.

4. At all relevant times, Defendant conducted business within the State of New York.

PARTIES

5. Plaintiff Heather Dymond is an individual who is a citizen of the State of New York residing in Suffolk County, New York.

6. Plaintiff is a natural person allegedly obligated to pay a debt.

7. Plaintiff is a “consumer” as defined by 15 U.S.C. § 1692a(3).

8. On information and belief, Defendant Commonwealth Financial System, Inc., is a Delaware Corporation with a principal place of business in New Castle County, Delaware.

9. Defendant regularly collects or attempts to collect debts asserted to be owed to others.

10. Defendant is regularly engaged, for profit, in the collection of debts allegedly owed by consumers.

11. The principal purpose of Defendant's business is the collection of such debts.

12. Defendant uses the mails in its debt collection business.

13. Defendant is a “debt collector” as defined by 15 U.S.C. § 1692a(6).

THE FDCPA

14. Congress enacted the FDCPA upon finding that debt collection abuse by third party debt collectors was a widespread and serious national problem. *See* S. Rep. No. 95-382, at 2 (1977), *reprinted in* U.S.C.C.A.N. 1695, 1696; 15 U.S.C § 1692(a).

15. The purpose of the FDCPA is to protect consumers from deceptive or harassing actions taken by debt collectors, with the aim of limiting the suffering and anguish often inflicted by independent debt collectors. *Kropelnicki v. Siegel*, 290 F.3d 118, 127 (2d Cir. 2002); *Russell v. Equifax A.R.S.*, 74 F.3d 30, 34 (2d Cir. 1996).

16. To further these ends, the FDCPA “establishes certain rights for consumers whose debts are placed in the hands of professional debt collectors for collection.” *Vincent v. The Money Store*, 736 F.3d 88, 96 (2d Cir. 2013).

17. In order for consumers to vindicate their rights under the statute, the FDCPA “grants a private right of action to a consumer who receives a communication that violates the Act.” *Jacobson v. Healthcare Fin. Servs., Inc.*, 516 F.3d 85, 91 (2d Cir. 2008).

18. Thus, “the FDCPA enlists the efforts of sophisticated consumers ... as ‘private attorneys general’ to aid their less sophisticated counterparts, who are unlikely themselves to bring suit under the Act, but who are assumed by the Act to benefit from the deterrent effect of civil actions brought by others.” *Jacobson*, 516 F.3d at 91.

19. To this end, in determining whether a collection letter violates the FDCPA, courts in the Second Circuit utilize “the least sophisticated consumer” standard. *Jacobson*, 516 F.3d at 90. “The test is how the least sophisticated consumer—one not having the astuteness of a ‘Philadelphia lawyer’ or even the sophistication of the average, everyday, common consumer—understands the notice he or she receives. *Russell*, 74 F.3d at 34.

20. The least sophisticated consumer standard pays no attention to the circumstances of the particular debtor in question. *See Easterling v. Collecto, Inc.*, 692 F.3d 229, 234 (2d Cir. 2012). Specifically, it is not necessary for a consumer to show that he or she was confused by the communication received. *See Jacobson*, 516 F.3d at 91. Likewise, the consumer’s actions in response to a collection letter are not determinative of the question of whether there has been a violation of the FDCPA. *Thomas v. Am. Serv. Fin. Corp.*, 966 F. Supp. 2d 82, 90 (E.D.N.Y. 2013).

21. Under the least sophisticated consumer standard, collection letters violate the FDCPA “if they are open to more than one reasonable interpretation, at least one of which is inaccurate.” *Clomon v. Jackson*, 988 F.2d 1314, 1319 (2d Cir. 1993).

22. Moreover, a debt collector violates the FDCPA if its collection letter is “reasonably susceptible to an inaccurate reading” by the least sophisticated consumer. *DeSantis v. Computer Credit, Inc.*, 269 F.3d 159, 161 (2d Cir. 2001).

23. Similarly, a collection letter violates the FDCPA “if it would make the least sophisticated consumer uncertain as to her rights.” *Jacobson*, 516 F.3d at 90.

24. To recover damages under the FDCPA, a consumer does not need to show intentional conduct on the part of the debt collector. *Ellis v. Solomon & Solomon, P.C.*, 591 F.3d 130, 135 (2d Cir. 2010). Rather, “[t]he FDCPA is a strict liability statute, and the degree of a defendant’s culpability may only be considered in computing damages.” *Bentley v. Great Lakes*

Collection Bureau, 6 F.3d 60, 63 (2d Cir. 1993). A single violation of the FDCPA to establish civil liability against the debt collector. *Id.*

ALLEGATIONS

25. Defendant alleges Plaintiff owes a debt (“the alleged Debt”).

26. The alleged Debt is an alleged obligation of Plaintiff to pay money arising out of a transaction in which the money, property, insurance, or services which are the subject of the transaction are primarily for personal, family, or household purposes.

27. The alleged Debt does not arise from any business enterprise of Plaintiff.

28. The alleged Debt is a “debt” as defined by 15 U.S.C. § 1692a(5).

29. At an exact time known only to Defendant, the alleged Debt was assigned or otherwise transferred to Defendant for collection.

30. At the time the alleged Debt was assigned or otherwise transferred to Defendant for collection, the alleged Debt was in default.

31. In its efforts to collect the alleged Debt, Defendant contacted Plaintiff by letter (“the Letter”) dated May 3, 2018. (A true and accurate copy is annexed hereto as “**Exhibit 1.**”)

32. The Letter conveyed information regarding the alleged Debt.

33. The Letter is a “communication” as defined by 15 U.S.C. § 1692a(2).

34. The Letter was the initial written communication Plaintiff received from Defendant concerning the alleged Debt.

35. 15 U.S.C. § 1692g provides that within five days after the initial communication with a consumer in connection with the collection of any debt, a debt collector shall, unless the information is contained in the initial communication or the consumer has paid the debt, send the consumer a written notice containing certain enumerated information.

36. 15 U.S.C. § 1692g(a)(3) requires the notice to include a statement that unless the consumer, within thirty days of receipt of the notice, disputes the validity of the debt, or any portion thereof, the debt will be assumed valid by the debt collector.

37. There is no requirement that the consumer dispute the debt in writing.

38. It is a violation of the FDCPA to require disputes be made in writing.

39. It is a violation of the FDCPA to include language in the letter that overshadows the required 15 U.S.C. § 1692g(a)(3) statement.

40. It is a violation of the FDCPA to include language in the letter that contradicts the required 15 U.S.C. § 1692g(a)(3) statement.

41. It is a violation of the FDCPA to include language in the letter that, when examined from the perspective of the least sophisticated consumer, overshadows the required § 1692g(a)(3) statement.

42. It is a violation of the FDCPA to include language in the letter that, when examined from the perspective of the least sophisticated consumer, contradicts the required § 1692g(a)(3) statement.

43. It is a violation of the FDCPA to include language in the letter that, when examined from the perspective of the least sophisticated consumer, leads the least sophisticated consumer to believe that her dispute must be made in writing.

44. The Letter states:

SEND ALL CORRESPONDENCE TO:
Commonwealth Financial Systems
245 Main Street
Dickson City PA 18519

45. Disputes need not be in writing. *Hooks v. Forman, Holt, Eliades & Ravin, LLC*, 717 F.3d 282 (2d Cir. 2013).

46. Disputes may be made orally.

47. The language concerning correspondence with Defendant overshadows the required 15 U.S.C. § 1692g(a)(3) statement.

48. The language concerning correspondence with Defendant contradicts the required 15 U.S.C. § 1692g(a)(3) statement.

49. The language concerning correspondence with Defendant, when examined from the perspective of the least sophisticated consumer, overshadows the required § 1692g(a)(3) statement.

50. The language concerning correspondence with Defendant, when examined from the perspective of the least sophisticated consumer, contradicts the required § 1692g(a)(3) statement.

51. The language concerning correspondence with Defendant, when examined from the perspective of the least sophisticated consumer, leads the least sophisticated consumer to believe that her dispute must be in writing.

52. Defendant has violated § 1692g, as the above-referenced language overshadows the information required to be provided by that Section. *See Vetrano v. CBE Grp., Inc.*, 2016 WL 4083384 (E.D.N.Y. Aug. 1, 2016).

53. 15 U.S.C. § 1692e prohibits a debt collector from using any false, deceptive, or misleading representation or means in connection with the collection of any debt.

54. While § 1692e specifically prohibits certain practices, the list is non-exhaustive, and does not preclude a claim of falsity or deception based on any non-enumerated practice.

55. Collection notices are deceptive if they can be reasonably read to have two or more different meanings, one of which is inaccurate.

56. The question of whether a collection letter is deceptive is determined from perspective of the “least sophisticated consumer.”

57. The collection letters could be reasonably interpreted by the least sophisticated consumer as incorrectly representing that a dispute must be communicated in writing. *See Vetrano v. CBE Grp., Inc.*, 2016 WL 4083384 (E.D.N.Y. Aug. 1, 2016); *Balke v. Alliance One Receivables Management, Inc.*, No. 16-CV-5624(ADS)(AKT), 2017 WL 2634653 (E.D.N.Y. June 19, 2017).

58. Because the Letter is reasonably susceptible to an inaccurate reading, as described above, it is deceptive within the meaning of the FDCPA.

59. The least sophisticated consumer would likely be deceived by the Letter.

60. The least sophisticated consumer would likely be deceived in a material way by the Letter.

61. The misrepresentation is material because it could impede the least sophisticated consumer’s ability to respond to the letter or dispute the debt.

62. Defendant has violated § 1692e by using a false, deceptive, and misleading representation in its attempt to collect a debt.

CLASS ALLEGATIONS

63. Plaintiff brings this action individually and as a class action on behalf of all

persons similarly situated in the State of New York from whom Defendants attempted to collect a consumer debt using a form collection letter substantially similar to that at issue herein, that includes the phrase “SEND ALL CORRESPONDENCE TO,” from one year before the date of this Complaint to the present.

64. This action seeks a finding that Defendant's conduct violates the FDCPA, and asks that the Court award damages as authorized by 15 U.S.C. § 1692k.

65. Defendants regularly engage in debt collection.

66. The Class consists of more than 35 persons from whom Defendant attempted to collect delinquent consumer debts using a form collection letter substantially similar to that at issue herein, that includes the phrase “SEND ALL CORRESPONDENCE TO,” from one year before the date of this Complaint to the present.

67. Plaintiff's claims are typical of the claims of the Class. Common questions of law or fact raised by this action affect all members of the Class and predominate over any individual issues. Common relief is therefore sought on behalf of all members of the Class. A class action is superior to other available methods for the fair and efficient adjudication of this controversy.

68. The prosecution of separate actions by individual members of the Class would create a risk of inconsistent or varying adjudications with respect to the individual members of the Class, and a risk that any adjudications with respect to individual members of the Class would, as a practical matter, either be dispositive of the interests of other members of the Class not party to the adjudication, or substantially impair or impede their ability to protect their interests. Defendant has acted in a manner applicable to the Class as a whole such that declaratory relief is warranted.

69. Plaintiff will fairly and adequately protect and represent the interests of the Class. The management of the class is not extraordinarily difficult, and the factual and legal issues raised by this action will not require extended contact with the members of the Class, because Defendant's conduct was perpetrated on all members of the Class and will be established by common proof. Moreover, Plaintiff has retained counsel experienced in actions brought under consumer protection laws.

JURY DEMAND

70. Plaintiff hereby demands a trial of this action by jury.

PRAYER FOR RELIEF

WHEREFORE, Plaintiff respectfully requests judgment be entered:

- a. Certifying this action as a class action; and
- b. Appointing Plaintiff as Class Representative and Plaintiff's attorneys as Class Counsel;
- c. Finding Defendant's actions violate the FDCPA; and
- d. Granting damages against Defendant pursuant to 15 U.S.C. § 1692k; and
- e. Granting Plaintiff's attorneys' fees pursuant to 15 U.S.C. § 1692k; and
- f. Granting Plaintiff's costs; all together with
- g. Such other relief that the Court determines is just and proper.

DATED: April 23, 2019

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